REJECTING THE THEORY/PRACTICE DICHOTOMY IN YOUTH AND COMMUNITY WORK TRAINING

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This article emerges from initial youth and community (Y&C) work training in a higher education (HE) institution. However, it is directed at all those readers, both in HE and in Y&C agencies who are involved in the management or delivery of initial and in-service training, and are currently engaged in debates about the nature and relevance of the training experiences they provide.

The last few years have seen considerable criticism of the youth and community work training agencies and their ability to deliver appropriate training and competent workers. This criticism has been both explicit (Jeffs & Smith 1993) and implicit in innovations such as the Apprenticeship Training Scheme which experimented with the transfer of control of training from the training agencies (Universities ans colleges) to the employers. There have been a number of assumptions underlying these implicit criticisms which are repeated in many other forms of publicly-managed professional training, for example teaching and social work. These underlying assumptions encompass notions of a split between theory and practice with the theory of college teaching divorced from the 'real world' of practice. There are also strong ideas about 'learning by doing' as the best way to prepare for professional life, and the notion of 'competence' is paramount in much of this change. Initial teacher training is an excellent example of this trend as central government policy has increasingly driven it out of the colleges and into the schools. This change appears to be based on spurious and simplistic theories which seem to reject theory in favour of practice as the key to developing good practitioners.

Over the last 20 years the influence of the 'competency' movement in both education and training has increased considerably and an analysis of the roots of this movement locates it clearly within an employer/management driven agenda (Tuxworth 1989). With a Government wishing to make some fundamental changes to the whole nature of education and training it is hardly surprising that these developments have had influence throughout a whole range of professional training. In health-related professions (Baloch, Beattie & Beckerleg 1989) and in social work training (Winter 1992) the debates have taken place at both a macro and micro level. The debate about competencies is still dominant in the caring professions (Hodkinson and Issitt 1994) and initial training for youth and community work professionals is no different in this respect (Norton et al 1994).

The research discussed in this paper emerges from a different viewpoint which considers *understanding and critique* as crucial components of good practice. Of course, this is not new and has its roots in the Aristotelian concept of 'practical wisdom' (Carr & Kemmis 1986). We argue that the ability of practitioners to plan, reflect, analyse and develop requires them to have a critical understanding of what they are doing and where it fits into the overall aims of their work. We acknowledge this is a difficult area and that we offer here only some initial explorations. We believe that as professional trainers we are already engaged in the process of

measuring the abilities and potentialities of youth and community work students but often only in an implicit way and often these potentialities are hidden whilst embodied within the curriculum. Therefore any attempt to address the quality of the training experience must start by finding a way to make all the component elements of the curriculum explicit and therefore more amenable to debate, discussion and judgement. In this use of the term 'curriculum' we are clearly discussing a social construction that as trainers we can influence and change not just in content but in ideological source. The way in which we construct this curriculum and make judgements of its efficacy should also explicitly embody the appropriate ideology for the field. Through the construction of the curriculum and the learning experiences designed around it we can encourage students to develop an appropriate 'mind-set' for professional practice. This is not merely about ensuring that anti-oppressive practice is central to the content of the curriculum, nor indeed that tutors operate in styles concomitant with the content; but that the nature of the curriculum, the pedagogy and the ways in which we assess embed the overall ideology. The term we found most appropriate here would be that the curriculum is structured around an 'emancipatory interest' (Grundy 1987). There are of course some inherent contradictions here not least how we square ourselves with involvement in the training of workers for a profession that espouses both emancipation and participation within a higher education context structurally founded on a hierarchy of knowledge. How do we teach anti-oppressive practice when it clearly resides within a 'teacher constructed world' (Laurillard 1993)?

Grundy identifies three specific forms of curriculum which are informative in the debate around the theory/practice divide. 'Technical interest' is essentially about control and often focuses on skills, has a product orientation and is at heart reproductive. It is easy to see that a curriculum driven by this ideology carries with it notions about learning and training that view the student as deficient and the trainer as an expert. This form of curriculum approach can be seen replicated within much of the competency movement. The youth and community work training field has a long history of rejecting this positivist agenda. The second form of curriculum, 'practical interest' would seem more appropriate to the field and would probably encompass a lot of youth and community work training. A curriculum constructed in this way is about developing meaning and understanding to enable participants to take practical action. Reflection, judgements and meaning are central concepts here and inherent in this is some concept of 'good' although this is not defined in any specific or measurable way. We would suggest that this would seem to be the nature of much initial training within HE institutions. The final form of curriculum is 'emancipatory interest'. Embodied within this are such concepts as 'freedom', 'truth', finding one's own voice and a critical reconstruction of the social world. It is not difficult to see how this form of curriculum may be appropriate for youth and community work training. It is considerably more difficult to see how this form of curriculum can rest within both a higher education system with a disempowering hierarchy and external professional endorsement which also 'controls' curriculum content.

Giddens (1991) may provide some answers to both the contradictions of striving for an emancipatory interest within a HE context and why a new competency led agenda has proved attractive to government interests. Through the overt emphasis

on action and practice (and of course its measurement to national standards) the government have been engaged in a process of re-establishing control over a number of professional or 'expert' systems which they see as responsible for some of the ills of our late capitalist society (Jones & Moore 1993). The processes involved in devising competencies 'disembeds' social relations from their specific context and as such they de-skill and alienate. However, this is a criticism that could equally apply to our own professional context where the site and nature of the training constructs an artificial divide between theory and practice. Through HE training we create 'expert' systems that are perceived as removed from 'real' people and 'real' field experience.

If we wish to counterbalance this we have to construct learning experiences which can strive to maintain a more situated and organic relationship with the field. Previous responses to this issue have consequently focused on moving the learning site back into the field. However, our starting point was not related to geography or the site of learning but an exploration of the component elements of the youth and community work curriculum and from this the development of a means of judging the quality of our training in delivering this curriculum. This means of delivering and judging the curriculum should strive to encompass more of an 'emancipatory interest' as being the most appropriate ideology for the field of practice. It may also then allow us as trainers to be both more overt and accountable about how we measure what might be called the 'artistry' of practice (Schön 1983). Initial training, in particular, is well placed to provide the opportunity to develop this difficult concept.

Effective practitioners need to understand why they are doing what they are doing, how it links with other parts of their job and their colleagues' work, and where it fits into the overall purpose and philosophy of their practice. The most appropriate way of doing all this is by developing a critical awareness of practice. Consequently, we have rejected the notion of an academic-vocational or theory-practice dichotomy and strive to embed professional training within the lived experiences of the students and the communities in which they work. We try not recognise theory and practice as opposite constructs but as inseparable elements of practitioner development. A 'theory stops being a theory when you start using it' (Biggs 1993). Therefore the challenge to youth and community work trainers is to allow those they are training the space, both in terms of time and academic freedom, to explore ideas and formulate critical questions but with a sufficiently integrated structure to ensure the learning is interlinked within the professionally validated context.

Developing and measuring the 'generic codes' of youth and community work practice

Our work drew on a range of theoretical and practical developments in the education of adults (see Ramsden 1992 for full discussion). However, our starting point was to find a methodology for curriculum development and evaluation that allowed us to reject the divide between theory and practice. If we were interested in judging the quality of our training, then we had to be able to identify what we meant by good quality learning. The starting point then was to attempt to codify all the component elements of the professional training curriculum and then to find a more explicit system of judgement which systematically evaluated this combination of various influences. We required a taxonomy that evaluated an integrated

combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes, their practical use *and* critique. This would provide us with a professional measure of the quality of understanding through the application of a critical social theory or more simply *understanding in action*. In many ways we were concerned to move away from habits, precedents and traditions about judging the quality of learning for the profession by devising a clearly articulated (and therefore open to critical discussion) process of holistic assessment (Carr and Kemmis 1986).

Within education there have been attempts to measure qualitatively (Bloom et al 1956, Schroder et al 1967 and Marton 1976, all from Biggs & Collis 1982) but the system we found more promising was the Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO taxonomy) developed by Biggs and Collis (1982). The strength of this model was that although it offered a system based on a structured hierarchy, it provided a model of progressive complexity and a systematic development from the concrete to the abstract. More significantly at the higher levels it required learning to demonstrate relationships between concepts and the generation of self-principles, autonomy and independence of thought and action. It also seemed to progress to understanding that was communally and socially constructed as opposed to individualistic; all key components in knowledge being reflexive, social and integrated into a professional identity. It seemed that at these higher levels it was seeking to acknowledge culturally embedded collective understandings rather than technical and highly individualised skills measurement (Jones and Moore 1993).

The SOLO taxonomy indicates that learning can be split into two distinct categories:

CONTENT - the facts/concepts/issues that constitute the *knowledge* of the subject area.

PROCESS - the cognitive processes that constitute the *understanding* and the *application* of the subject. That is the appropriate ways of *critical thinking* for the subject area.

This notion of *process* is more complex than the idea of *skills* because it assumes a theoretical grounding to underpin the use of skills and it encourages a pedagogy that is congruent with the ideology of practice. It is also a concept that would correspond to the type of professional behaviour that inherently embodies cognitive dimensions of practice - Schön's 'Reflective Practitioner' (1983). The higher levels of the taxonomy measure how well both these areas of content and process are integrated and inform each other.

So in using this method of measurement our starting point became clear; we had to identify all the component elements of both the *content* and *process* required for professional training. These elements when ordered and clustered appropriately would constitute the *generic codes* of youth and community work training. These generic codes are the basic *content and process structures* that make up the subject area. The curriculum content of our training courses would implicitly embody the 'generic codes' and in moving students through this curriculum we would be explicitly making judgements about the level of acquisition and use of the codes whilst overtly acknowledging the value bases inherent within those judgements. Clearly, in redesigning our course, we were able to engineer learning opportunities

that consciously contained one or more identified codes and could be judged by ascertaining the level of student operation within the codes embodied in the specific exercise, assessment task or learning opportunity.

The key term here is *level* and this is addressed qualitatively within the SOLO taxonomy. It offers a methodology for judgement based on five distinct levels; pre-structural, uni-structural, multi-structural, relational and extended abstract. These levels provide the system by which we would judge the uptake of the generic codes. Obviously the process of arriving at the generic codes for youth and community work is a large undertaking and beyond the scope of this paper, yet we fail to see how we can engage in any debate about the quality of training without some explicit communal agreement about the content and nature of the actual curriculum that is professionally validated. This very same exercise has also been undertaken in broader, more representative forums (National Youth Agency Working Party 1993). As an illustration of how the SOLO taxonomy could operate, we show how one code we identified translates into practice.

Generic code - the concept of oppression

PRESTRUCTURAL
'What oppression?'

Inability to see it as a concept at all or one that has any reference to the youth and community work field. Inability to see self within this framework - - either as oppressor or oppressed.

UNISTRUCTURAL
'I think the way we treat animals is awful'

Offers only one piece of relevant data that connects in some way with the 'cue' (oppression). Conclusions are jumped to on the basis of this one piece of data, often leading to generalisations and sweeping statements. May use the concept of self but only in a very egocentric and unconnected way - this is how I feel so it has primacy. Can be riddled with inconsistencies which do not appear to cause any problem.

MULTI-STRUCTURAL
'Yes, in my work the young men are a problem, so we have a girls' night once a week. Another example would be the way my boss treats me as a part-time worker.'

A number of isolated examples can be given in response to the cue and generalisations are made from within these examples - but understanding remains fixed within this limited data. Can often be given in the form of lists. There may be some self-awareness based on simple identity politics, but not to the extent of responsible ownership of an integrated identity. Conclusions can be reached from this limited data; there is a possibility that the conclusions could be different after a second look at the same data. A need to make sense of it all but not always achieving this.

RELATIONAL
'There is so much oppression in the world, it is difficult to single out any particular forms. The ones that concern me in my professional working life are...'

Clearly understands the different aspects and experiences and can link and inter-relate them to both the self and the wider world. May separate out professional and private worlds and not be able to integrate these into a coherent whole. All this is done within the given data and does not extend outside it. May seem too stuck within the realm of subjective experience. Within this response there is consistency but something from outside it may make it crumble.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
'My privilege is at someone else's expense - my life and work are about doing something about it. As a ....'

Understands the range and diversities of oppression at perceived, experienced and imagined levels. Able to generalise beyond the given data and situations and use this understanding to hypothesise about unexperienced situations. The translation of learning from one context to another. The full integration of self-awareness and openness about self-identity that works alongside the many contradictions. Conclusions can be held open to allow for diversity and alternatives.

There would seem to be a direct link here with the process of identity development closely associated with oppressed individuals and groups. Sensitisation, signification, subculturalisation and stabilisation (Plummer 1981) are clear stages of identity development that students in training would need to go through and, significantly, they are directly parallel to the processes their work with young people and community groups should follow if they were operating a model of anti-oppressive practice.

Our initial research therefore attempted to measure both these content and process areas and what follows here is one example of the structural alterations we made to the course design and pedagogy to encourage students to operate at the higher levels of the taxonomy. The samples of data presented here outline our attempts to begin to judge the understanding and critique developed in students through participation in these new course experiences. The example offered is not intended to be representative but provides a sense of how we may begin to redefine the judgement of quality in youth and community work training.

Course design; encouraging quality and depth

A *deep approach* to learning (Ramsden 1992) has been shown to be closely associated with the two higher levels of the taxonomy, relational and extended abstract. This is not surprising as a *deep approach* 'focuses on underlying meaning rather than on literal aspects, and seeks integration between components and with other tasks' (Biggs 1989, p. 26). Biggs & Telfer (1987) showed in their review of relevant research that

Teaching that gave evidence of deep learning contained in sharp form one or more of the following:

i. An appropriate motivational context
ii. A high degree of learner activity
iii. Interaction with others, both peers and teachers
iv. A well-structured knowledge base.

These, therefore, were our guiding principles in designing a new postgraduate youth and community work training course. Ramsden (1992) says 'We cannot train students to use deep approaches when the educational environment is giving them the message that surface ones are rewarded' (p. 64), and Boud (1989) points to the 'number of notable studies over the years which have demonstrated that assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor' (p. 35).

Anyone having worked or studied in HE will know that, except for a very small minority, it is students' perception of the how the assessment works for any given course that effects the amount and type of work they do, and what they prioritise. For example, if attendance is not assessed, then students will make very clear decisions about whether attendance at a given lecture will help them write the essay or pass the exam! In other words, assessment provides the strongest external motivation to work. What we wanted to do was to ensure that the assessment tasks themselves encouraged and developed a study culture dependent on learning of a *relational* and *extended abstract* nature and learning that was embedded in practice. We wanted them to engage with the subject matter in an involved way; one that would require them to understand and link ideas, relate them to their own experience and apply them critically to their professional work. Given our working knowledge of students' fixed relationship with assessment, it became apparent that *we should re-conceptualise assessment not as a method of 'expert' measurement of a concrete object but the process which drives the learning and leads to a specific quality of learning.*

Therefore we reassessed what learning processes would encourage the sort of experiences we required for each area of study and then we redesigned and planned assessment tasks that would require the students to undergo this range of learning activities. In other words, the design of the assessment was congruent with and embedded in the learning experience. This refocusing of assessment also involved exploring ways of altering the power relationship involved in assessment where the students had more control over some of these judgements. Clearly power is a crucial concept in training and one that has significances beyond the simple boundaries of 'education' (Freire 1972) and we shall return to the contradictions of empowering and emancipatory experiences within HE contexts in our conclusions. We will now outline one particular example of a newly designed assessment task and some tentative results from the opening research interviews which focused, firstly, on the student experience of the process and secondly the initial steps to measure the quality of the outcome from this new course experience.

The matrix

This exercise was designed to cover the bulk of the curriculum in the first term of a Social Education Unit. The matrix, whilst clearly indicating subject areas and boundaries, was a very open assessment item structured to drive information collecting and learning and encourage groups of students to develop a critique of practice. Group work was important because it also encouraged them to share the data collection and discuss their findings. However, group work also embodied the ideology of both the field and the curriculum design:

> *Critical reflection involves more than knowledge of one's own values and understanding of one's practice. It involves a dialectical criticism of one's own values in a social and historical context in which the values of others are also crucial (McTaggart and Singh in Grundy (1987) p 124).*

Figure One indicates the extent of both the structure and boundaries of the task.

	Voluntary provision	Statutory provision	Provision for young women	Provision for minority groups
Brief History				
Analysis of underpinning ideology				
Relationship of this development to concurrent social changes				
Examples of current practice and its ideology				
Your personal view of this provision				

Figure 1: Matrix of youth and community provision

The research and the results

Over the course of the year, and particularly in the last term, we collected a range of data in order to evaluate the impact of our innovations. This research involved quantitative and qualitative methods; the qualitative methods are the ones we focus on here. The qualitative approach to the research involved an independent interviewer carrying out semi-structured interviews with 12 students, over half of the course cohort. The interview schedule focused on the matrix task (amongst others) in order to collect data about specific experiences rather than generalised accounts. Furthermore, it was a task from the first term, so students were able to discuss it with the benefit of hindsight and in relation to their subsequent experience on a 12 week professional placement. The interviews concentrated on the process of the tasks *(motivation, interaction, activity and structure)* but they also sought examples of learning that students had retained in order to explore the depth of learning (as judged by means of our embryonic taxonomy).

Whilst not making any claims as to the representativeness of these comments they clearly indicate student perceptions, feelings and understandings related to the experience on the course and our interpretation of these responses is not value-free but via our understandings and interpretative categories as the teachers of the course under investigation. Carr and Kemmis (1986) stress the importance of combining the teacher and researcher role, whilst highlighting both the difficulties and the strengths of this dual role. For the purposes of this paper we will focus on the

data relevant to the professional development of workers through analysis of the quality of their understandings. The research results covering the redesigned *process* elements of the pedagogy of the course have been published elsewhere (Bloxham & Heathfield 1994). We concentrate here on our attempt to make some judgements about the quality of learning around our previously identified generic code of oppression which was structurally embedded within the exercise outlined.

Evaluating the quality of learning - the generic code of oppression

Data gained from interviews was used to attempt to measure at what level students were operating when given specific cues about their understanding of the curriculum content areas identified previously for the matrix. Clearly students did not enter the course as empty vessels and therefore learning outcomes identified may be a summation of various influences. However, the questions attempted to distinguish specific understandings gained from the course, or the interplay of course activity with previous experience and understanding. It is not possible to single out this exercise as the clear causal factor in these measured developments in students. It is just this problem that the competency movement crudely avoids; skills are measured as if removed from their specific context or directly relational to the particular people involved in the interaction. Within the limited bounds of this paper we suggest that the data here indicates the important contribution this exercise made to overall student learning. We would also have some serious reservations about attempting to measure the nature and quality of these human interactions whilst still operating within the limiting discourse boundaries rooted in positivism. Our initial research is an attempt to find a way of making these judgements outside and beyond this 'scientific' approach to educational research. We would wish to be wary of dismissing students' comments about their experiences as 'unrepresentative', whilst acknowledging the influence of our own critical judgements in assessing the insightfulness of such comments.

Responses were measured against the intended objectives of the exercises in the light of the five levels of the taxonomy. As stated at the outset of this paper, our intention was to engineer learning experiences that encouraged students to operate at relational or extended abstract levels. The previously outlined generic code of the concept of oppression was used here to attempt to measure the quality of understanding.

Although classifying responses in this way can only be subjective, we undertook our content analysis independently and separately before conferring. This method of assessment, of course, is no different to the way in which more standard academic work is actually assessed. We each classified the responses, seeking examples of multi-structural, relational and extended abstract thinking. In classifying responses, students' ability to deduce and generalise beyond the given experience was crucial in allocation to the extended abstract category. At the highest level we would be expecting students to integrate their knowledge and understanding and make it their own; that is develop a fully integrated professional identity.

This content analysis indicated that all those interviewed were operating at least at a multi-structural level with some at a relational level and half the sample at the extended abstract level. It would be fair to say that a large number of those operating at the relational level may also have been offering responses that could be classified as extended abstract, but the interview data here is not as clear cut as in the most obvious cases. The following examples show how students achieved the objectives of the exercise by identifying a personal philosophy and value base derived from an

analysis of youth and community work practice both now and in the past. It is important to remember that these students ostensibly followed a group and independent study programme to acquire their knowledge and understanding of this curriculum:

> *I've got a feeling of where I now sit in there which is my personal philosophy. Where I'm most comfortable. So I think I take that away. That was part of the matrix...I would say I sit..I wouldn't be extreme as like a radical paradigm, whatever they call it. I'd sit somewhere like social reform stage of it. I think things certainly need to be changed. It's no good just like fixing things up. I think things actually need to be changed, but I'd say it's more of an evolutionary process than a revolutionary process.*
>
> *I've never been motivated towards history and things that happened even in this century. So it's given me a knowledge of what's happened. But then the analytical part - why did these things happen? And then you get the why and then you get some policies coming from this... some reports coming from this. For me, coming from the science and technology angle, I'm 100% more clued up.*

This student concludes discussion of the matrix with:

> *[I'm] More political, because for many years I've been convincing myself that I'm not political and I'm not really interested in that sort of thing. But I think you have to be now. ...the matrix has shown us because it's part of the overall course, so the matrix has been one step in.*

The evidence here suggests that the exercise has provided a clear opportunity for students to relate historical knowledge and understanding into a professional identity for their future practice within a critical social framework.

In analysing responses relating to the matrix exercise there are some key questions that help identify the knowledge base that the students have gained and their level of understanding about the curriculum areas the exercise was designed to cover. A number of these questions are also clearly useful in helping to locate the students' responses within the framework of the taxonomy. The questions you see outlined here were formulated to analyse the data and were not necessarily the questions used by the interviewer. They are the means by which we can judge the quality of the responses, not necessarily the cues by which the responses were elicited.

In looking for evidence of learning at an extended abstract level, we looked for links, coherence, integration and deduction. The following quotations would seem to provide evidence for this.

1) *Did the students make links, were they able to generalise and deduce across the whole curriculum span covered by the exercise?*

> *Yes, yes. I think if you have an understanding of oppression in the broader sense and a political structure and realities in a broader sense, you can see those patterns again and again in the statutory and the voluntary and the minority with women and black people, with all the rest. You can make links across the board.*

Most students were able to make links across the various sections of the exercise.

2) *Did they understand the inter-relationships and the diversity of provision both historically and currently?*

I think probably the most important thing for me was that it hasn't been a recent thing. The youth and community service hasn't been a recent thing, and some of the ideology behind it these days isn't a recent thing either. That there have always been theories about how to help as such, do you know what I mean? What to do with people. That was interesting for me, looking at like the sort of philanthropy aspect, you know, because I've never really thought about that before, because I was very much in the present day, stuck in the present day. And I always wondered sort of how.... I always felt the youth and community service was just sort of there, and it had just been plonked on the 1990s and the 1980s or something, and I never knew anything about that. I always felt that was missing. I didn't know what the background was to any of it.

Here we see evidence of a diversity and range of understanding that has a historical perspective that is leading students to a more focused sense of professional identity and a specific reference to 'theories' being of use. As a professional training course we need to be able to monitor the development of student ability to deduce professional implications for their learning.

3) *Were there any indications that this new knowledge and understanding would inform their future practice?*

Well it's made me more aware of..... You see I've done a lot of work in the past, and I miss that gut feeling that that's good, that's good stuff and that's not, that's not so good. I like working this way, I don't like working that way. But if somebody asked me what I was doing, I couldn't really say - I'm doing this and I'm doing this because...And I'd no historical background or theory at all and I used to get really worried if people asked me what I did because...I'd have to actually describe what I did rather than telling them, you know I'm doing this and it's called social education and I'm doing it because....So learning about that and putting it into a historical context and seeing this stuff about character building, where that fitted into the matrix, and when and why the different style of work started to emerge, social education, and how that sort of developed was really useful.

It's going to be different for me because at the forefront of my mind it's the oppression of different peoples. Practice - my greatest fear is how on earth can I come to the understanding that I have now of the position of gay people in society...how on earth do I put that into practice? How on earth do I make an LGG group in Northern Ireland? ... But you know, how on earth do you really shake the apple cart like that? I mean that's for certain what I am challenged to do, but I do fear I think...because with learning and with change and development comes the fear and the realities...Oh OK it's great that you've learnt and great that everything's changed, but then the ball's in your court to do something about it.

Again here we have a very explicit indication of a changed understanding which is framed within a practice context. There is no separation of theory and practice, new insights, awareness and understandings are expressed through their embodiment in practice. Obviously a great deal of learning took place and seems to have been initiated by the nature of this exercise. These students all developed a stronger sense of their personal identity and how their understanding of the history and ideology of

practice would hopefully inform their future professional practice. Responses here also indicate a surprising depth of understanding which, within the terms of the taxonomy, was being transformed and integrated into a coherent professional identity. Of course there must obviously be many influences from the rest of the course and outside it, but the matrix exercise had been important in initiating and generating a bed-rock of understanding. This important function of the matrix is confirmed by other students:

> *I suppose doing the matrix and work before the matrix we did in the sessions, was useful in sort of like positioning yourself within the provision - your beliefs anyway, your values.*

It is significant to note that these students were talking of an exercise they had completed a full six months before the interviews took place. In conclusion, the most effusive student (and one of the least practically experienced) had this to say:

- I've changed incredibly as a person.
- Really?
- Oh, unbelievable. But how do I get away from all that stuff which I can look at and which I can represent and relate to... But how do I get it to be in a place where I'd like it to be? That for me is the crux of the challenge.

The evidence cited here is encouraging in that these students appear to have achieved high levels of learning from this exercise. They were not untypical of the whole student group. These findings would seem to confirm the value of striving towards an 'emancipatory interest' driven curriculum despite the unavoidable contradictions it causes those responsible for its implementation. Students here may only be indicating an intention or a capability for a particular form of anti-oppressive practice but this is no more or less than they indicate in any other form of 'off-site' education.

Conclusions

This article has suggested a more systematic and complex approach to underpin training practice in youth and community work within HE institutions; an approach which pays attention to the quality of learning and understanding through a systematic re-evaluation of the processes and pedagogy involved. It is also an approach that requires a more explicitly defined curriculum. This desire for explicitness, of course, cannot be divorced from the need to evaluate and assess in the training of youth and community workers. We are not alone in this search for the more 'definable' yet we hope that we have indicated that our motivation is not driven by a need to control or police the profession. In advocating this approach to course design, evaluation and assessment, we have made a bid to purge from Y&C training the unhelpful distinction between theory and practice. In its place, we have promoted the concept of learning *generic codes;* codes which provide students with a fundamental level of understanding and critique to inform good, *competent,* practice. As trainers involved in HE we are looking for *understanding in action* not a simplistic, behavioural measurement of distinct actions devoid of their context, meaning or value. Exactly the same developments field practitioners strive for in their work context. We are all engaged in processes of developing *capabilities.*

Our model suggests that trainers in the pre-service and in-service education of Y&C workers need firstly to consider the ideology that drives the construction of the curriculum and secondly, consider how this may be reflected in course objectives, course design and pedagogy. Course objectives need to be carefully framed to pro-

vide for a broad understanding of a given area, but with the essential opportunity for participants to make the ideas *their own through a critical dialogue with others.* This educative process should strive to parallel the actuality of practice. It is not just that we merely teach such concepts as empowerment and oppression, nor that we operate a congruent pedadgogy but that they are thoroughly embedded within the whole experience. It is through this that students encounter and assimilate the professional value-base and counterbalance the professional tendency to separate out theory and practice. This learning environment should parallel professional understanding in action when working with groups of young people or communities.

Within HE the idea of an emancipatory curriculum is complex and contradictory. Of course students have limited control over the curriculum and the ways in which they are judged, however it is significant that this curriculum is *peer* generated and endorsed (Norton 1994). It is not generated through an employer led system and without abandoning the whole concept of professionalism it would be difficult to remove this disempowering element of training. We feel this imbalance should not be a reason for avoiding the search for more emancipatory practices. The debates about power and control, expertise and professionalism, directly relate to similar practitioner debates. In what sense is there a balance or equivalence between a professionally qualified worker who is *paid* to work with young people on an empowering curriculum? How do practitioners ride the contradictions of their involvement in emancipatory or radical practice whilst receiving the government 'shilling'?

Overall, this research has shown conclusively that course design, pedagogy and assessment that are concomitant with both the professional ethos and the actuality of practice, can be used successfully to improve the quality of students' learning, certainly on college-based courses. More significantly, we feel that the research indicates that it is possible for students in professional training to conceive of education that does not split into distinct and often separate areas of theory and practice. We need to develop greater clarity about both the ideological drive and content of our curriculum, so that we can encourage sharing, judgements and critique around the social construction of knowledge to encourage 'artistry' in practice, holistic understandings and secure professional identities. As teachers we need to gain more clarity about our specific role in improving the quality of practice. We need to invest more time in understanding our own actions.

Clearly there are wider and broader implications for the field of professional training in general. We reject here the usual, and we believe unsolvable, dichotomy between theory and practice. The training discourse is often framed within these terms and therefore locked into a debate that can only attempt to provide solutions by mediating between these two oppositional constructs. What we have proposed here is firstly one route out of this discourse and secondly a theoretical framework which operates in a different realm. It is to be hoped that it may provide one antidote to the currently dominant ideology that favours 'objective' measurable actions as the best form of professional training.

It also finds resonances within the older debate about the academic/vocational divide. Again solutions can only be found within the boundaries of a limiting discourse. Our proposals outlined here and tested in our research on new developments in our training indicate that we may have found a route out of this stagnant and restrictive debate. If we can identify the *generic codes* for youth and commu-

nity work practice, these can form the core of both training and practice. On their own these are meaningless, they are given their life by being encapsulated within the mantle of the ways in which these codes are *actioned by both trainers and practitioners.* Training within HE can provide the necessary time and environment to encourage this more complex professional development and identity.

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